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Failed Followers in Mark: Mark 13:12 as a Key for the Identification of the Intended Readers

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IN AN ESSAY, published in 1987, that has gone practically unnoticed, Timothy Radcliffe proposed a new hypothesis for the origin of Mark.¹ As an attempt to bring us closer to the intended readers it deserves serious attention and further investigation. Since Radcliffe's arguments are only partly convincing, it is the purpose of this article to propose and examine other evidence which is perhaps more convincing and may confirm the hypothesis.

I. The Hypothesis and the Evidence

According to Radcliffe's hypothesis, if apocalyptic was the unquestioned framework of the Christian perception of the world until the Neronian persecutions,² then the persecution in 64 C.E. and the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. made a change of paradigm inevitable.

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¹ T. Radcliffe, "The Coming of the Son of Man,' Mark's Gospel and the Subversion of the Apocalyptic Imagination," *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe O.P.* (ed. B. Davies; London: Chapman, 1987) 167-89. The essay is not mentioned in *Internationale Zeitschriftensschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete* 34 (1986-87) and 35 (1987-88), or in *NTA* 33 (1987), 34 (1988), and 35 (1989).

² On these persecutions, see M. T. Griffin, "Nero," *ABD*, 4. 1080; D. S. Potter, "Persecution of the Early Church," *ABD*, 5. 231-35; R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 1-67; *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge NT Seminar* (ed. W. Horbury and B. McNeil; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) has nothing on the subject.

A. The Sitz im Leben of Mark: Persecuted Christians Who Had Seriously Failed

The apocalyptic imagination, characterized, according to Meeks, by three pairs of complementary opposites, one pairing this age and the age to come, another pairing heaven and earth, and a third pairing those who belong to the church and those who do not,³ was unable to make sense of the two events, and therefore it could no longer operate. The third pair of opposites especially, that of community members and outsiders, the children of light and the children of darkness, was radically undermined by the experience of the persecution.

During the persecutions in Rome, members of the community who had been arrested betrayed fellow members by disclosing their names to the authorities. As a result, relations within the different household communities, in which members knew each other intimately, were thoroughly disturbed. The persecutions had turned the community of Rome into a divided house in which Christians could no longer trust each other.

It was partly in response to this crisis, says Radcliffe, that the Gospel of Mark was written. Until then, the different Christian communities spread around the Mediterranean had communicated by means of letters; but the situation in Rome made the use of another literary genre necessary, a genre using the form of narrative. The members of the Roman congregation urgently needed a story in which the plot and the acting characters reflected their various roles in the persecution. Theirs was the traumatic experience of seeing brothers and sisters die as the victims of betrayal by fellow Christians. Some of them were themselves guilty of providing information leading to the death or apostasy of other Christians. They needed a story in which they could find themselves.

The Gospel of Mark is such a narrative. It offers its hearers many examples of followers of Jesus who repeatedly fail, and at the same time, it communicates a new theological perspective to its hearers. In this way the book enabled the Roman Christians to come to terms with the suffering caused by the persecution and aggravated by members of their own community, as well as with the pain of remorse for personal failure. Mark showed them a way to overcome the crisis. It is not without reason that the story is cast in the form of a "way." It starts with John going into the desert to prepare a way for the Lord. Jesus leaves Nazareth and finally makes his way to

³ W. A. Meeks, "Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity," *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, August 12-17, 1979* (ed. D. Hellholm; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1983) 689.

Jerusalem, where death will not have the last word. The book ends with a voice ordering the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see Jesus. Thus, concludes Radcliffe, Mark's story offered a new perspective to the Roman Christians whose ecclesial home had collapsed under the weight of internal division in the wake of the persecution.

B. The Value of the Hypothesis

The explanatory value of Radcliffe's hypothesis lies in the fact that it not only accounts for two prominent features of the gospel but also links them to each other, making this connection for the first time, as far as I know. The first of these two features is the great attention given to persecution in Mark. The second is the almost continual failure of Jesus' followers, both men and women. Their failure is related to their thinking and acting: they are deaf and blind to Jesus' identity, to what he says and what motivates him; partly in consequence of this, their behavior becomes more and more maddeningly inadequate. This second aspect especially is very intriguing, the more so if we realize that Mark was written for readers who saw themselves and their community as a continuation of the little circle of Jesus' twelve disciples and of the larger group of all his followers. That the book, nevertheless, focuses constantly on the failure of those predecessors is so unexpected and unnatural that it calls for an explanation.

Although Radcliffe does not mention it, his hypothesis bears on the discussion started by Joseph Tyson, and especially by Theodore J. Weeden, in the sixties and seventies.⁴ In a number of successive studies in which the negative role of the disciples in Mark was heavily underscored, Weeden developed the hypothesis that the disciples represent Mark's historical opponents, whom he supposed to be intruders proclaiming a θεῖος ἄνθρωπος christology. According to Weeden, the author of Mark, wanting to refute this understanding of Jesus, portrayed the disciples as persons holding the same christological view, and then had Jesus himself condemn them. Robert C. Tannehill, partly because he believes that the portrayal of the disciples is less negative than Weeden thinks, has put forward a different view, which is also that of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon: both in their negative and positive roles,

⁴ J. B. Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *JBL* 80 (1961) 261-66; T. J. Weeden, *The Heresy That Necessitated Mark's Gospel* (diss., Claremont Graduate School and University Center, 1964; summary *ZNW* 59 [1968] 145-58); idem, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). For an objection to this interpretation, see Dan O. Via, Jr., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 75-76.

the disciples represent the readers.⁵ In this context Malbon characterizes them as "fallible followers." It is remarkable, however, that, in contrast to Weeden, neither Tannehill nor Malbon takes up the question what this may have to do with the situation of the intended readers of Mark. That is especially remarkable in the case of Malbon, because in her latest contribution on the subject known to me she explicitly raises the "external" context in addition to the "internal" one.⁶

Recently Paul Danove joined the discussion.⁷ He rejects Weeden's view,⁸ and he agrees with Tannehill.⁹ Moreover, in a chapter entirely devoted to the implied reader, he pays great attention to the different competencies the book presupposes in the authorial and narrative audiences.¹⁰ Nevertheless, although in his theoretical framework he distinguishes between the original reader and the contemporary real reader,¹¹ he (like Tannehill and Malbon) does not move to the original reader. After enumerating the competencies mentioned, he writes this in his conclusion: "Though my discussion of these competencies offers textual grounds for their acceptance, most are readily apparent. Thus, the interpretation does not require the assumption of a particular geographic locale, social environment, or rhetorical exigency to guarantee its validity. The results of the analyses, however, do offer considerable information for the projection of a possible social environment or rhetorical exigency."¹²

Just at the point where Danove could, but does not, cross the threshold to consideration of the original reader, Radcliffe's hypothesis becomes interesting. Like Weeden, Radcliffe sees a relation between the disciples in the book and the flesh-and-blood people in the first century. Unlike Weeden, he identifies them as Roman readers from the last few decades of the first century C.E. As for the disciples, Radcliffe goes further than Tannehill and Malbon in that he regards them not just as "fallible followers" but also as "failed

⁵ R. C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977) 386-405; idem, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979) 68-76, 81-84; E. Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 29-48; idem, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *NovT* 28 (1986) 104-30; idem, "Texts and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples in Mark," *Semeia* 62 (1992) 81-102.

⁶ Malbon, "Texts," 83, 85-96.

⁷ P. L. Danove, *The End of Mark's Story: A Methodological Study* (Biblical Interpretation Series 3; Leiden: Brill, 1993).

⁸ Ibid., 203-4.

⁹ Ibid., 184 n. 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., 167-202.

¹¹ Ibid., 108 and elsewhere.

¹² Ibid., 229.

followers," as Danove does. Whether his attempt to reach the original readers is successful depends on the strength of his arguments, which, along with other evidence, will be examined next.

C. Extratextual Indications

Radcliffe's hypothesis begins with the assumption that Mark was written for the Christians in Rome after the persecutions, in reply to the burning of Rome in A.D. 64, and also—but this is irrelevant for our purpose—after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. We need not enter into the question of the Roman origin of Mark here. Although this view is not undisputed, it has recently received increasing signs of approval, and, in my opinion, it is easier to argue than any other.¹³ The same assertion can be made concerning the relationship between Mark and a situation characterized by persecution.¹⁴

Radcliffe cites a number of arguments based on external evidence in support of his hypothesis. The first is taken from Tacitus, who writes in the *Annals* that during the Neronian persecutions those who confessed that they were members of the Christian sect were arrested first, and then, *on their disclosures*, a great many others were convicted: "Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde *indicio eorum* multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt."¹⁵ From this Radcliffe infers that most of the martyrs were convicted on the evidence of other Christians,¹⁶ and he goes on to observe that Pliny, writing later, states that such is usually the case with Christians.¹⁷ Radcliffe derives his second argument from Philippians.¹⁸ If this letter was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, then Phil 1:15-17, which speaks of φθόρος (envy), ἔρις (strife), and ἐπιθεία (partisanship), refers to the presence of internal divisions within the Roman community even before the persecution under Nero. Radcliffe's third argument is derived from *1 Clem.* 5:2-5, where the death of Peter and Paul is connected with ζῆλος (jealousy), φθόρος, and ἔρις.¹⁹

What is the value of these extratextual indications? To refer in this context to Phil 1:15-17 is unjustifiable. The view that Philippians was written in Rome has had little support in recent years, and therefore, it cannot be

¹³ See B. van Iersel, "De thuishaven van Marcus," *TvT* 32 (1992) 125-42.

¹⁴ B. van Iersel, "The Gospel according to St Mark – Written for a Persecuted Community?" *NedTTs* 34 (1980) 15-36; idem, "Mark 9,43-48 in a Martyrological Perspective," *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à G. J. M. Bartelink* (Instrumenta Patristica 19; ed. A. Hilhorst and C. H. Kneepkens; Steenbrugge: Abbatia S. Petri, 1989) 333-41.

¹⁵ Tacitus *Ann.* 15.44.

¹⁶ Radcliffe, "Mark's Gospel," 179 n. 1.

¹⁷ Pliny *Ep.* 10.96.6.

¹⁸ Radcliffe, "Mark's Gospel," 179 n. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

accepted without argument as the starting point for further analysis. Besides, the passage is about proclaiming Christ, not about reporting Christians to the authorities. The mere fact that the quoted passage has nothing whatever to do with persecutions renders its use as a reference to Christians informing on fellow Christians useless. The passages from Tacitus, Pliny, and *1 Clement* are, without exception, several decades later than the time of Nero. In addition, Tacitus, who is the only one speaking directly about the persecution following on the great fire of Rome, may well have modeled his account on events in his own day. With respect to *1 Clement*, it should be asserted that one cannot conclude from 5:2-5 that it was jealousy, envy, and strife of fellow Christians which brought about the death of the apostles. Thus, this passage too cannot be accepted as the basis for a valid argument. At the most, *1 Clement* may be seen as providing historical information that fits into the given reconstruction, if this is proved correct on other grounds.

We can, thus, say that the only extratextual indication for Radcliffe's claim that "immediately before and after the persecution we have evidence of a collapse of community, the breakup of the household"²⁰ is the one passage from Tacitus' *Annals* quoted above.

D. Intratextual Indications in Mark

Although Radcliffe's aim is to launch a possible new vision, not to argue its merits and demerits in a systematic and critical fashion, he does cite in passing a few passages and themes from Mark which support his thesis. The most important of them is Mark 13:12-13.²¹ If these verses refer to what happened in Rome in A.D. 64, they, along with vv 9-11, provide some internal confirmation of Radcliffe's reconstruction. To this one may add that it is Peter, James, John, and Andrew who are directly addressed by Jesus in v 9, and that Peter may well have belonged to the group of well-known Christians who, according to Tacitus, were the first to be arrested, whereas v 12, which is a generalizing description, may refer rather to a second, greater wave of arrests, carried out on the evidence of Christians arrested before.

Radcliffe also refers to other themes.²² All of them have to do with the third pair of opposites in Meeks's apocalyptic model, in that they relate to the blurring of the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In this connection, Radcliffe mentions the theme of the disciples' failure to understand Jesus, although only they have been given the mystery of the kingdom of God (4:10-13). He refers to Peter, who is on the side of Jesus as well as on the side

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 187.

of Satan (8:29-33), to outsiders like the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30) and Bartimaeus (10:46-52) who succeed, while the disciples are blind and consistently fail, and finally to the anonymous centurion at Jesus' death, who confesses that Jesus was God's son and does so at a moment when the eleven remaining disciples have fled (15:39).

Radcliffe has not given his vision a firm basis. It is such an interesting hypothesis, however, that it deserves further investigation.

II. Other Textual Indications?

In the absence of any extratextual evidence apart from the passage by Tacitus, I intend to examine the text both for the other indications that may confirm Radcliffe's vision and for data that may receive a plausible, and perhaps even indispensable, surplus semantic value when the book is read from the perspective of this vision.

A. *The Plot Structure of Mark*

The chief indication of the thematic importance of the disciples' failure for the readers of Mark is to be found in the plot of the book, recently analyzed by Paul L. Danove.²³ After the disciples' initially positive response to Jesus' call, their failure to understand Jesus is explicitly treated in the constituents 4:10-34; 4:35-41; 6:33-44; 6:45-52; 7:17-23; and 8:14-21.²⁴ The theme is developed and intensified in 8:27-10:52, a passage in which Jesus, in the context of the thrice-repeated prediction of his future execution, invites the disciples to do what he does,²⁵ and it is finally brought to a climax in 11:1-15:41.²⁶ Here Jesus forewarns the disciples that they will desert him, without his warning having any effect on their behavior. Consequently, their final actions—the failure of the three disciples to stand by Jesus in his death agony, Judas' betrayal, the disciples' flight from the garden, and Peter's triple denial—proceed in accordance with Jesus' prediction.

In this context it is important to note that although Jesus frequently rebukes the failed disciples for their incredulity, fear, and lack of understanding, his commitment to them is not for a moment suspended or jeopardized. "Jesus' continuing response indicates that the disciples' failure does not destroy the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. Rather, Jesus attempts

²³ Danove, *The End*.

²⁴ Ibid., 141-42, 149-50.

²⁵ Ibid., 142-44.

²⁶ Ibid., 144-46.

again and again to quiet their fears and bring them to understanding.²⁷ I think that this narrative element could have a very important function for the hypothesis proposed by Radcliffe. That Jesus remained committed to the disciples, regardless of their serious failures, would have been a great help to the failed followers who wished to stay on in the afflicted household communities of Rome.

The ultimate failure of the Twelve—thus Danove again—is continued in the women's failure to deliver the message of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples and to Peter.²⁸ Since this last failure terminates the story and incapacitates the designated characters from proclaiming the resurrection, the gospel narrative presents a failed story. It presents a successful plot, however, in that the real reader—like the implied reader, encouraged by the solidarity between Jesus and the disciples not to accept the resultant crisis of interpretation, but unlike the implied reader, able to act outside the world of the story—is called upon to pass on the news of the resurrection.²⁹ Consequently, Danove's proposed interpretation of the gospel narrative is "that it constitutes a communication between a real author and a real reader, and the content of this communication is an invitation to receive Jesus' definitive invitation to be a proclaimer of the gospel."³⁰

In speaking about God's determination of the necessities of discipleship, Danove makes some questionable assertions. Among them are assertions about the actor involved in the verb παραδίδωμι. His point of departure is that "the divine necessity which governs the fate of Jesus likewise governs the fate of disciples."³¹ As an argument for God's determining role in the persecutions, Danove refers first to the use of passive forms of the verb παραδίδωμι with respect to John (1:14) and to Jesus (9:31; 10:33; 14:21,41). He regards these verbal forms as instances of the divine passive. I think this view is hardly tenable, and with respect to the disciples simply impossible. With the disciples as referents, the verb does not occur even once in the passive. On the contrary, after the impersonal third person plural or participle in 13:9,11, the actors in the action of handing over are explicitly mentioned in 13:12: they are the closest male relatives, brother and father.³²

²⁷ Ibid., 214.

²⁸ Ibid., 206-8.

²⁹ Ibid., 209-10, 220-21.

³⁰ Ibid., 222. This conclusion is in line with that of J. L. Magness, *Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark's Gospel* (SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 124-25.

³¹ Danove, *The End*, 215.

³² A second argument for God's determining role would be that Jesus' commitment to the disciples is expressed in covenantal language in Mark 14:22-25 (Danove, *The End*, 215-16), but

So, rather than being an indication of God's determination of discipleship, the use of παραδίδωμι in 13:9,11,12 as well as the fact that various forms of παραδίδωμι are used in 3:19; 14:11,18,21,42,44 to designate the person who is to hand over or betray Jesus (ὁ παραδιδούς αὐτόν), seem to suggest concrete behavior of failed followers in which the authorial audience could see itself mirrored. I shall return to this topic, but first I should like to examine the text for other indications, besides those already mentioned by Radcliffe and Danove, which could support Radcliffe's view.

B. Mark 9:42-48

The first question is whether there are any other passages in Mark which can only be understood, or are best understood, when they are assumed to refer to the thematic combination of persecutions on the one hand and the betrayal of fellow Christians to the authorities on the other. Such a passage may be 9:42-48. My reading of this pericope is based on the presupposition which I have argued before,³³ and which has met with agreement as well as rejection,³⁴ that 9:43-48 is best understood against the background of the story of the Maccabean brothers. Accordingly, σκανδαλίζω in this passage, like σκανδαλίζομαι in 4:17, belongs in the context of the torture of persecuted Christians, and it thus acquires the specific meaning "induce someone to apostatize (from faith)."³⁵ The torture may have been aimed at the abjuration of faith or, like torture to this day, at extracting information which people do not want to provide voluntarily.³⁶

If 9:43-48 does indeed refer to persecutions (the objections raised to it have not changed my view), then the same may also be true of 9:40-42. Its content agrees well with such a context, for it is precisely in a situation of persecution that people are explicitly for or against Christ (9:40) and that Christians may find a fugitive fellow Christian at the door asking for help in

I do not see why this should indicate that it is God who has handed over Jesus. Moreover, it is clear from ὑπὲρ πολλῶν at the end of 14:24 that there is no question of a covenant meant specifically for the disciples. Danove (p. 215) relates ὑπὲρ πολλῶν to the disciples. I think this is not correct, for after ὑμῖν and ὑμῶν at the beginning of the passage (v 18) the use of ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, instead of ὑπὲρ πολλῶν, would obviously have been called for in v 24 if the disciples had been meant there.

³³ van Iersel, "Written for a Persecuted Community?" 26-27; idem, "Mark 9,43-48."

³⁴ Supported by J. D. M. Derrett, *The Making of Mark: The Scriptural Bases of the Earliest Gospel* (Shipston-on-Stour: Drinkwater, 1985) 1. 164; rejected by R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 525.

³⁵ See B. van Iersel, "Het begrip σκάνδαλον κτλ in het Nieuwe Testament," *Vox Theologica* 35 (1965) 33-41.

³⁶ The second possibility seems the more likely. Cf. Griffin, "Nero," 1080: "Later apostasy from the religion was clearly irrelevant."

Jesus' name (9:41). Both the offence and the punishment of 9:42 are, in my opinion, nowhere more relevant than in a situation of persecution. Since the punishment represented by the hyperbole of the millstone is a form of extreme penalty, a noneschatological counterpart of "to be thrown into Gehenna" of 9:45,47,³⁷ the offence must be equally serious, and it must also come close to the unforgivable sin (3:29) and to being ashamed of Jesus (8:38). As for the nature of the offence, the qualification of the little ones made to fall as τῶν πιστευόντων [εἰς ἐμέ] automatically raises the thought of apostasy. Actually 9:42, unlike 9:43-48, is not about the victim of persecution but about the persecutors. The issue is not torture unto death but the possibility that someone, confronted by the executioner or the judge, may renounce his or her faith in order to save his or her life (cf. 8:34-38).³⁸ Anyone guilty of this particular crime is threatened with the most serious form of punishment. True, the hyperbolically formulated threat suggests the direct role of the executioner or judge rather than the indirect role of the arrested Christian who has disclosed the name and address of a brother or sister, but it may apply to the latter as well.

C. Mark 10:28-30

Another passage to be considered in this context is 10:28-30, in particular, the striking phrase μετὰ διωγμῶν which concludes the list of new relatives and fields promised by Jesus to whoever has left everything for his sake and for the gospel. The reference to fields in conjunction with relatives is remarkable, because there is no mention in Mark of any followers of Jesus possessing fields. Is it possible that there were Christians in Rome around A.D. 65 who had given up their fields? Were it not too speculative, one might be tempted to think of the Rufus mentioned by Paul in Rom 16:13. Could this be the same person as the Rufus in Mark 15:21 whose father, on his way home from the fields, was compelled to carry Jesus' cross?

Even more remarkable than the mention of fields is the reference to persecutions. Coming as it does at the end of the list, this strikes a jarring note after the euphoria of Jesus' promise. Of greatest importance for us in this context is the fact that persecutions—the word evokes 4:17, where διωγμός

³⁷ For the possible connection between being thrown into the sea and being thrown into Gehenna, see A. Humbert, "Essai d'une théologie du scandale dans les Synoptiques," *Bib* 35 (1954) 23-24. By analogy with the *lex talionis*, "life for life, eye for eye, foot for foot," which forms the background of 9:43-48, recourse to the millstone is a retaliatory measure against someone acting as a "stumbling-block," who as a judge, executioner, or traitor has caused a tortured (fellow) Christian to abjure the faith. See van Iersel, "Het begrip σκάνδαλον," 35.

³⁸ For the charge of arson or *odium generis humani* to be dropped, the one arrested had to furnish proof that she or he was not a Christian, which did not necessarily imply "later apostasy" (see n. 36).

is also used—are mentioned after the list of relatives, the list of members of that new family into which a follower of Jesus is incorporated. This seems to suggest that there is a connection between Jesus' new spiritual family and the experience of persecutions. What the nature of the connection is, the text does not say. R. H. Gundry wonders whether this does not perhaps “merely provide the reason why his followers have to flee from house to house, from family to family, from farm to farm” and decides that the unemphatic position of the phrase μετὰ διωγμῶν favors this possibility.³⁹ But Gundry overlooks that on this supposition it would have been more obvious to write simply: νῦν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ (τῶν) διωγμῶν. The combination of καιρός with such a genitive is after all not unusual in Mark, as is clear from 11:13.⁴⁰ In contrast to what Gundry thinks, it is precisely from its position that the phrase receives its dysphoric character and thus attracts the reader's attention. Of course, this does not prove that the new family of brothers and sisters actually played the role in the persecution attributed to them by Radcliffe, but when 14:17; 9:42-48; 10:28-30; and 13:9-12 (interrelated through the words σκανδαλίζω and διωγμός) are read in connection with each other, they furnish a considerably stronger basis for Radcliffe's hypothesis than does 13:12 alone.

12. The Surplus Semantic Value of Some Narrative Components

Not every acceptable surplus semantic value can be interpreted as an indication of the validity of an assumption. Since we are concerned with an extratextual assumption directly relevant to the situation of Mark's original audience, our argumentation must be confined to the surplus value which components of the story may have had for the intended readers in ancient Rome. This, of course, does not necessarily exclude a surplus value for later readers as well.

1. Family and failure. In the situation presumed by Radcliffe, the Roman Christians belonging to a household community were incorporated into a new family. Constantly surrounded by a supportive circle of brothers and sisters, those early Christians had an unusually strong sense of family. In this context it may be important that an equally strong sense of family is present in Mark, although it has a certain ambiguity there. To some extent, this ambiguity is caused by the partial overlapping of kinship and spiritual relationship, already clear in the first call stories in 1:16-20. The first four followers, who continue to play a special role in the book as the inner circle around Jesus, are two pairs of brothers. Yet it is explicitly said of the second

³⁹ Gundry, *Mark*, 568.

⁴⁰ Compare Matt 13:30; 21:34,41; Luke 1:20; 8:13; 19:44; 21:24.

pair that they leave their father; so in this case family ties play a role which receives a positive as well as a negative value. When 1:29-31 reports that Jesus, with his first four disciples and Simon's mother-in-law, is staying at the house of Simon (Σίμων καὶ οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ in 1:36), this group of six can be recognized as proleptic of a household community. Moreover, it seems that the house at which Jesus stays when he is in Capernaum is always that same house of Simon (2:1,15; 3:20,31; 9:33). The reader also has the impression that Jesus has a comparable *pied-à-terre* at Bethany: the house of Simon the leper (11:1,11,12; 14:3). The impression that Jesus wanders about tirelessly appears to be only one side of the picture. The other side is that of proleptic household assemblies, of a number of people, gathered around Jesus, who have freed themselves from the pressure of family bonds to establish new relations with Jesus himself and with one another.⁴¹

Of special relevance to our discussion is 3:20-35, the story of Jesus' severing his own family ties and establishing other relationships leading to the constitution of a new "family." Of greatest importance for us at this point, however, is another link established in the passage, the link between the reaction of those with Jesus (οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ, 3:21, specified in 3:31 as his mother and brothers) and the reaction of the scribes who have come down from Jerusalem. Here the unbelief of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth (6:1-6), combines proleptically with the rejection of Jesus by the city of the temple, Jerusalem. Jesus' own relatives assume that he must be beside himself, whereas his opponents from Jerusalem allege that he has Satan in him. The house of Jesus' origin appears to be a divided house. When Jesus says in 3:25 that a house divided against itself cannot stand, this is also true of his own parental home. The proverbial saying refers analeptically to the contrast between Jesus and his family (3:20-25) and proleptically to the division effected by a man handing over his own brother and thus causing his death (13:3). The linking of the objections in 3:21-22 is further strengthened in 3:24-25, where the metaphors of the prince and the divided family correspond, respectively, to those of the divided kingdom and the divided house. This is why 3:21-30, without saying so explicitly, gives the reader the impression that Jesus' mother and brothers make common cause with his opponents who have been plotting his death since 3:6. This evokes the situation of the household assembly whose members are no longer able to rely on one another. Both in the family of natural relatives and in the community of brothers and sisters, people—willingly or unwillingly—may be the cause of one another's downfall.

⁴¹ See also E. Struthers Malbon, "TH OIKIA AYTOY: Mark 2:15 in Context," *NTS* 31 (1985) 282-92. Her view that 2:15 refers to Jesus' house seems to conflict with the fact that in Mark Jesus has no house to call his own. He always stays at a house owned by someone else. See esp. 1:29; 14:3,14.

2. *Handing over.* Another cluster of material which receives a surplus semantic value when Mark is read with Radcliffe's view in mind is concentrated around the idea expressed by the verb παραδίδομι. When Christians who have been arrested on the evidence of fellow Christians feel let down and betrayed by their brothers (13:9,11,12), they know they are not the first who have had to live with that feeling. Their fate is similar to that of John the Baptist, who is handed over already on the first page of the book (1:14), and to that of Jesus himself.

At first it is not clear who is responsible for having handed over John, but from the flashback of 6:17-29 it appears that Herod has seized and imprisoned John for speaking out against his marriage to Herodias (6:18-19). Herod respects and appreciates John (6:20), yet he orders John's execution when Herodias' daughter, instigated by her mother, asks for John's head on a platter (6:24-25). After executing John, the guard enters and serves John's head on a dish, as though he had performed a culinary *tour de force*. This is perhaps a proleptic reference to the dish with the broken bread representing Jesus' broken body in 14:20-22. Finally, representing the act of handing over John in a visual iconic sign, the story ends with the guard delivering the head to the girl and the girl passing it on to her mother, with which the action comes full circle.

But the act of handing over John is only a prelude to the act of handing over Jesus himself. The betrayal of Jesus is already announced in 3:19, at the end of the list of the Twelve: καὶ Ἰούδαν Ἰσκαριώθ, ὃς καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτόν. For readers who are new to the story this must be a startling piece of information. At this point of the story they are still ignorant of its development and outcome, but lest they forget, the term παραδίδομι recurs as a reminder in 9:31 and in 10:33. In these places the passive is used, but the recollection of 3:19 would make it difficult for readers to understand this as a divine passive. They find their understanding confirmed in 14:1-11 by the account of the circumstances and manner in which Judas hands Jesus over to the chief priests and scribes, exactly the same group named in 10:33. A climax in the story is reached when Jesus appears to know of the betrayal (14:17-21, with two occurrences of παραδίδομι, one in the passive voice and the other in the active voice, but each time with mention of the actor) yet does nothing to stop the traitor (ὁ παραδιδούς, 14:42) from actually pointing him out to the party sent to arrest him (14:42-53).

It seems obvious to me that for a congregation in which a man has been arrested on the evidence of his own brother, a father arrested on the evidence of his son, and parents arrested on that of their children (relatives in a natural or spiritual family), the betrayal of Judas receives a very specific meaning. To be betrayed by one's very own is for these readers not something unprecedented, and that fact gives a clear surplus value to their reading of the book.

Exactly what is added to the book's meaning cannot be determined until we have completed our investigation. One thing can already be said, however. Unlike Matthew (27:3-10) and the author of Acts (1:15-20), Mark does not say what happens to the traitor in the end. Suffice it to quote Jesus' cryptic words about him: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to the one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born" (14:21). From this the reader may infer that Judas will fare ill, but not how he will meet his end.⁴²

Is it really obvious, though, that 13:12 refers to Christian families? Family divisions attended by murder and manslaughter are a common feature of the apocalyptic scenario, appearing in texts like Mic 7:2,6;⁴³ Isa 3:5; 19:2; *1 Enoch* 100:1-2; 4 Ezra 5:9; 6:24; *Jub.* 23:19. Consequently, the announcement in 13:12 could be regarded as a conventional or obligatory ingredient that deserves no specific attention. With R. Pesch,⁴⁴ one must note, nevertheless, that in Mark this standard theme has such a particular color and tone that it does attract special attention. By being embedded between two sentences in the second person plural (vv 11 and 13) the passage is given a reference that is markedly different from that in the other apocalyptic passages just mentioned. The announcement concerns the four disciples—two pairs of brothers—directly addressed by Jesus (13:5), and through them, all of his followers (13:37). Moreover, by means of the preceding vv 9-11 a connection is made with the situation in which followers of Jesus are hauled before courts for the sake of their faith. Finally, it is also worth pointing out that the components of 13:9-12 are linked to one another precisely by the verb that is of central importance for our theme, παραδίδωμι.⁴⁵ My conclusion is that the passage is indeed best understood as one dealing with Christians who reported brothers and sisters to the authorities.

This raises the question of the nature of the family relations in 13:12. A present-day reader will automatically understand the passage as saying that Jesus' followers are delivered up to death by blood relatives rather than by members of the household of the faith, but after 3:31-35, in which Jesus leaves his relatives standing outside and designates those who do the will of

⁴² The way the story of Judas is told in Matt 27:1-10 would fit well with what Mark says about him. That is especially true of the confession in v 4. On the other hand, v 5 is quite ambiguous. Read as the description of a kind of self-execution, it may have a positive function, but read as an expression of utter despair, it may discourage exactly those who have been guilty of betraying fellow Christians. In fact there is no evidence that the author of Mark knew, or did not know, Matt 27:1-10 or part of it.

⁴³ Quoted in Matt 10:35 || Luke 12:53.

⁴⁴ R. Pesch, *Naherwartungen: Tradition und Redaktion in Mk 13* (Kommentare und Beiträge zum Alten und Neuen Testament; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1968) 134.

⁴⁵ L. Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted* (ConBNT 1; Lund: Gleerup, 1966) 212.

God as his new and true family, it is at least equally possible that the kinship terms ἀδελφός, πατήρ, and τέκνα refer to fellow Christians. This possibility becomes a probability in the light of 10:29-30, which promises that whoever has given up home and relatives for the sake of Jesus will receive numerous new relatives (among them ἀδελφοί and τέκνα) already in this age, and this same passage also mentions persecutions (μετὰ διωγμῶν). Finally, it would not have been exceptional for members of the community to be related to one another, as the two pairs of brothers were in 3:16-19, and as the women were in 15:40-16:8. Precisely among Christians meeting in households, such kinship by blood would have been frequent. That it was so in Rome is quite clear from Rom 16:3-16.

3. *Peter, Judas, and the other disciples.* It is clear that in Mark, after the disciples' successful practice mission in 6:30, Jesus' followers fail almost continually and without exception. Even the women, who surprise the reader by being unexpectedly present at the cross after Jesus' death (15:40) and then watch where Joseph of Arimathaea buries Jesus (15:47), fail in the last few lines of the book, just like the male disciples before them.⁴⁶ They fail, first, by going to the tomb after the Sabbath in order to embalm the body of the risen Jesus as though it were the body of a dead person, and second, by not carrying out the messenger's order to tell the disciples that Jesus will again go ahead of them in Galilee. Still, as is evident from the absence of any reproach for their actions, the narrator feels much less strongly about the failure of the women, serious though it is, than about the failure of the men, particularly of Peter. Indeed, in contrast to what the narrator has Jesus say of the disciples in 4:40, the narrator's final comment on the flight of the women, ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ, sounds more like an apology than a reproach. Christians who would make the informants among them suffer for the pain they had caused might fruitfully recollect the apologetic ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ of the gospel and thus respond positively to the challenge posed by its open ending.

As a group, the disciples fail to understand who Jesus is and what he teaches them about the nature of his ministry and about his future suffering and death (4:10-13,40; 6:37,49-50; 7:18; 8:4,14-21; 9:10,32,38). Once the scenario of the betrayal opens (14:1-2,10-11), the failure of the remaining eleven

⁴⁶ See B. van Iersel, *Reading Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989) 201-4; Struthers Malbon ("Fallible Followers," 43) understands ἀπὸ μαρκόθεν of 15:49, which is a repetition of the same phrase in 14:54, as "a mark of fallibility," but even if the phrase has this negative connotation, it has no relation to the frequent and sometimes severe accusations regularly made by Jesus against his male followers or to the unfavorable light in which the narrator repeatedly makes those followers appear. Therefore, I do not consider the women to be among the "failed followers" who are the subject of the present contribution, and I should like to recall (perhaps unnecessarily) Jesus' pronouncement about the anonymous woman in 14:8-9 of whom Struthers Malbon ("Fallible Followers," 40) says that "no other Markan character is given this distinction."

disciples is depicted in colors no less glaring than those used to depict the failure of Judas. Jesus tells them that they will all fall away (with σκανδαλίζομαι again, in 14:27), and that is what happens. After Jesus' arrest they flee, not just away from the garden and away from Jesus, but away from the story for good (14:50).

The central role played by Peter in these episodes is underlined in several ways—first, by his boast that he will not fall away like the others (σκανδαλίζομαι, 14:29) to which Jesus responds with a prediction for Peter alone, insisting that before the cock crows twice, Peter will deny him three times; second, by his emphasized role as one of the three disciples whom Jesus implores to stay awake with him at Gethsemane (14:34); and finally, by his denial of Jesus in the court of the high priest's palace (14:53-72). The first crow of the cock does not bring him to his senses, and before the cock crows again he has three times denied that he knows Jesus. Yet, despite Peter's cowardice and extreme infidelity, Jesus remains loyal to him, as is abundantly clear already from 16:7 alone.

For the reader, Peter is in some respects a counterpart to Judas. Their final appearance in Mark is characterized by the fact that each of the two performs an action, the opposite of the other's action, which sets him solidly against Jesus, just as Peter had earlier stood in opposition (8:32). Judas points Jesus out to the high priest's party as the one he knows: ὃν ἂν φιλήσω αὐτός ἐστιν (14:44), whereas Peter, himself pointed out as one of Jesus' party by one of the high priest's maids, contends exactly the opposite, namely, that he does not know Jesus at all: οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον (14:68,70,71). Peter's action is equivalent to those expressed by (ἀπ)αρνέομαι in 14:30-31 and by ἐπαισχύνομαι in 8:38, so that his professed willingness to die with Jesus rather than deny him proves to have been sheer bragging. It also seems that his earlier opposition to Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death was really no more than an expression of his own inability to meet the ultimate challenge demanded of a true follower of Jesus, that is, to die with Jesus (14:31, συναποθανεῖν). Thus, both the first and the last man on the list of apostles have failed most seriously, the first by refusing to be identified with Jesus, the last by identifying him.

The resurrection of Jesus and the messenger's commission to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus will go ahead of them in Galilee⁴⁷ and that they will see him there (16:7) make it clear to the reader that the disciples' failure is not the end of the story. Before this, the story has already been told of

⁴⁷ I have argued for the translation "in Galilee" in B. van Iersel, "'To Galilee' or 'in Galilee' in Mark 14,28 and 16,7?" *ETL* 58 (1982) 365-70. By writing consistently "in(to) Galilee" Danove (*The End*) leaves the question undecided.

Peter, in contrast to Judas, repenting his refusal to be identified with Jesus, so that the way of following Jesus is open to him again. If Radcliffe is right, Mark's portrayal of Peter and Judas not only offered the Christians of Rome two important symbolic figures but also used them to illustrate two of the situations in which members of the community found themselves as a consequence of their role during the persecutions. The congregation was thus helped to come to terms with its failure.

The story of Judas is particularly important for Christians who have betrayed other Christians. In ancient Rome, those Christians could recognize in Judas' betrayal the full context of their having enabled the authorities to track down fellow Christians who, as a result, had been arrested and executed, or had renounced Jesus to escape death (cf. 9:42). For their fellow Christians, the figure of Judas was the proleptic narrative representation of what had happened to their own community.

The story of Peter's denial illustrates a different kind of failure. In 14:54-72 Peter is represented as the counterpart of Jesus. Jesus' brief affirmation of his own identity, ἐγώ εἰμι (14:62), contrasts sharply with Peter's three denials of Jesus, culminating in the perjurious οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον ὃν λέγετε (14:71). By denying any relationship with Jesus, Peter escapes being killed with Jesus. In a similar situation, a number of Christians managed to survive the persecutions by denying that they were among the followers of Jesus—some after being tortured, others not (cf. 9:42-48).

While people suffering persecution can derive courage and hope from the figure of Jesus himself,⁴⁸ Mark's story about Peter and about the contrasting figure of Judas shows that even those who have named fellow Christians to the authorities or have disowned Jesus in court need not despair. Besides the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter, Mark relates also that Peter burst into tears (14:72). Of those to whom, at the very end of Mark's book, the message is addressed that the disciples will see Jesus in Galilee, Peter is the only one mentioned by name.

The new perspective offered above by the First Gospel to the divided household community of Rome consists above all in its emphasis on Jesus' unfaltering loyalty to the disciples, which holds the promise that betrayers,

⁴⁸ See D. Dormeyer, *Die Passion Jesu als Verhaltensmodell* (NTAbh ns 11; Münster: Aschendorff, 1974) 283; idem, *Der Sinn des Leidens Jesu* (SBS 96; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1974) 48, 89; R. Kühschelm, *Jüngerverfolgung und Geschick Jesu* (Österreichische biblische Studien 5; Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches katholisches Bibelwerk, 1983) 163-84, 260-72. Of these, only Dormeyer (*Passion*, 283) observes, "Das Versagen Petrus bei der Nachfolge Jesu tröstet den Schwachen, der ebenfalls versagt hat," but he does not apply this to specific circumstances.

or "outsiders," may become members of the community, or "insiders," again. It is in this sense that Danove writes: "The unified model of discipleship presents a goal to guide the followers of Jesus in their attempt to imitate him. It also provides a basis for encouraging disciples who frequently experience failure by confirming Jesus' commitment to them."⁴⁹

4. *The messenger who, himself, has also failed (14:51-52; 16:5).* As I have explained more fully elsewhere,⁵⁰ the young man of 16:5, whom the reader easily, and I think rightly, connects with the young man of 14:51-52, also receives a semantic surplus value from the perspective of Radcliffe's vision. In this case, the semantic surplus value is even less fit to be used as an argument than the other passages discussed in this section are, but it is otherwise considerably more fascinating. Through the influence of the interpretation of Matthew and Luke, the reader may be tempted to think of an angel.⁵¹ True, ἄγγελος, unlike νεανίσκος, occurs fairly often in Mark, but precisely because νεανίσκος is found only in 14:51-52 and 16:5, the unprejudiced reader can hardly fail to see a connection between the young man in 16:5 and the one in 14:51-52.⁵²

The view that the young man of 16:5, whose message is not passed on in the world of the story,⁵³ is the voice of the implied author-narrator and is, therefore, intended for the authorial audience is a view for which I have argued before.⁵⁴ It has been adopted, I think, by P. Danove when he speaks of the

⁴⁹ Danove, *The End*, 219.

⁵⁰ B. van Iersel, "'His Master's Voice': De impliciete verteller in Marcus [The Implied Narrator in Mark: The Voice and the Figure]," *TvT* 34 (1994) 115-27.

⁵¹ M. A. Tolbert (*Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 294) infers from the white clothing and the position on the right side that the young man is of divine pedigree, but she fails to notice that the quality and the intensity of the white color cannot really be compared with those of 9:3 and that the sitting on the right side is expressed not by ἐκ δεξιῶν, as in Psalm 110 and in Mark 10:37,40; 12:36; 14:62, but by the deviating *hapax legomenon* ἐν τοῖς δεξιοῖς.

⁵² On this, see the following recent contributions: A. Vanhoye, "La fuite du jeune homme nu (Mc 14,51-52)," *Bib* 52 (1971) 401-6; R. Scroggs and K. I. Groff, "Baptism in Mark: Dying and Rising with Christ," *JBL* 92 (1973) 513-48; B. Standaert, *L'Evangile de Marc: Composition et genre littéraire* (Brugge: St. Andriesabdij, 1978) 153-68; F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Charles Eliot Norton Lecture, 1977-78; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 49-73; H. Fledderman, "The Flight of a Naked Young Man (Mark 14:51-52)," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 412-18; F. Neirynck, "La fuite du jeune homme en Marc 14, 51-52," *ETL* 55 (1979) 43-66 (= *Evangelica* [BETL 60; Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press, 1982] 215-38); E. L. Schnellbacher, "Das Rätsel des νεανίσκος bei Markus," *ZNW* 73 (1982) 127-35; B. Saunderson, "Gethsemane: The Missing Witness," *Bib* 70 (1989) 224-33.

⁵³ That the women may yet have said something to somebody, and that the message thus was passed on, as Magness (*Sense and Absence*, 100) thinks, seems to me to be in flat contradiction with the express denial in 16:8.

⁵⁴ See van Iersel, *Reading Mark*, 207-9.

failure of the story and the success of the plot.⁵⁵ I have gone further by linking the young men of 14:51-52 and 16:5 narratively and metaphorically as two narrative figures who, besides presenting the voice of the implied author-narrator, also make his shape or figure visible.⁵⁶ The reader, who forms an image of the implied author-narrator on the basis of the textual signals received in the process of reading,⁵⁷ almost automatically relates the two characters to each other. That produces a combination which is directly relevant to our subject. By running away at the moment of Jesus' arrest, the implied author-narrator, too, has seriously failed. Thus, the readers in Rome around A.D. 70 who have failed are in good company. Not only Peter, Judas, and the other ten but also the narrator of the book have failed. Especially to those readers it must have been a consolation that the failure of the young man in 14:51-52 did not stand in the way of his becoming the messenger of the resurrection in 16:5.

III. The Value of the Internal Evidence

Neither the intratextual indications which possibly contain a reference to the situation assumed by Radcliffe nor the textual data which receive a surplus semantic value from this perspective can be regarded as conclusive evidence for Radcliffe's hypothesis. One may say, however, that the probability of his hypothesis is increased by the demonstrable semantic value added to the meaning of the book when it is read from this perspective. It is not possible to measure this increase in any way, nor is it possible, I think, to compare the degree of probability of this hypothesis with that of a hypothesis in which some other situation is proposed for the original audience of Mark. On the other hand, if Radcliffe's proposal gains some probability through his arguments—and it definitely does in the case of Mark 13:12—it is possible to say that its degree of probability is enhanced by the cumulative effect of the other intratextual indications presented above. To sum this up: Radcliffe's claim that the situation in Rome after A.D. 70 occasioned the writing of Mark seems to me to be highly questionable, and to be unprovable with the data now available; but that this situation occasioned the negative portrayal of the disciples seems to me to have a fair measure of probability.

It also seems to me that when the indications presented above have been weighed, it will be difficult to assign a better function to the story of Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal, told to a community which holds Peter in great

⁵⁵ Danove, *The End*, 220-21.

⁵⁶ See van Iersel, "'His Master's Voice'."

⁵⁷ Ibid. The diagram (p. 116) is wrong: instead of pointing to the left (like the lower arrow), the upper arrow before the "real reader" should point to the right.

esteem, than the one attributed to it in Radcliffe's hypothesis. Thus, until a more suitable hypothesis comes along, there is every reason to employ Radcliffe's vision as a working hypothesis in the exegesis of Mark.

An exegesis shaped by this vision is also significant for readers today. Human failure is a reality of all times. A failure similar to that of the community of Rome around the year 64 will probably not occur in our part of the world in the foreseeable future, since the German Democratic Republic has been united with the German Federal Republic, and the Stasi has been abolished; nevertheless, the way through failure to forgiveness and reconciliation remains of vital importance for Christians who have failed in other ways. In this sense, Christians today, no less than the members of the ancient community of Rome, need a story like the Gospel of Mark which enables them to identify with the figures and roles in the story of Jesus that help them come to terms with their failure.